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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SINIORA INTENDS TO USE NAHR AL-BARID TO PURSUE PALESTINIAN MILITIAS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 6/21 meeting, PM Siniora conveyed to the Ambassador his conviction that the fight at Nahr al-Barid was a watershed event -- one which will enable his government to take the offensive against the numerous concentrations of militants located in the 12 Palestinian refugee camps and in previously off-limits sanctuaries in the Beqaa Valley and along the Syrian border. Siniora urgently requested continued military assistance from the U.S., particularly ammunition to replace depleted stocks, and stated he will pursue similar donations from both Arab countries and the EU.

Concerning the political situation, Siniora views the French initiative with circumspection, but recognizes its value as a "delaying action" to hold off pro-Syrian President Lahoud's threat to create a parallel government. The Prime Minister found it most interesting that while opposition forces crudely threaten to install a second cabinet and thereby seriously destabilize the country, they are also hotly pressing their campaign to form a national unity government. Siniora believes Michel Aoun is finally serious and the time may be at hand to make an offer to expand the cabinet, but only if the critical issue of the presidential election is included in the deal. While admitting it would be extremely difficult to win consensus for a strictly March 14th president, Siniora believes it will be possible to elect a president who holds two essential positions: sovereignty for Lebanon and the ability to work with Syria as an equal. End summary.

¶2. (C) Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his senior advisor, former Ambassador Mohamad Chatah, met with the Ambassador and Special Assistant at the Grand Serail on June 21. PM Siniora said he would be heading to Paris late on June 25 following a meeting in Beirut with visiting CODEL Issa. PM Siniora said he looked forward to his breakfast meeting with the Secretary, as well as meetings with French officials.

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Mohamad Chatah, who would be accompanying Siniora to Paris, indicated he would be returning as soon as possible to Beirut to continue (apparently) accelerating discussions with March 8th opposition figures on the possibilities of an expanded cabinet and an agreement on the presidential election.

"THE ARMY HELD!!"

¶13. (C) PM Siniora was in a clearly confident mood and expressed to the Ambassador his great satisfaction with the performance of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in its arduous fight at Nahr al-Barid. Noting that the last strongpoints of Fatah al-Islam militants were steadily being eliminated by the army's elite units, he stated that there is now a real opportunity to confront the long-standing problem of armed Palestinian militants in his country. Siniora said the backing of the army by almost every sector of Lebanon's society, along with the skill and dedication shown by the troops in very difficult close urban combat, will allow him to demand the disarmament of Syrian-backed and armed Palestinian militants who reside in almost every refugee camp, as well as the more dangerous sanctuaries in the Biqa and along the Syrian border.

¶14. (C) The Prime Minister was clearly fortified by the fact that despite predictions to the contrary, the confessionally-diverse army "held" and maintained strong discipline in the face of a determined enemy who tried to play the confessional card. Siniora asked who would have thought that an army with a considerable number of Sunni troops would unhesitatingly confront and vanquish an outlaw Sunni extremist group.

¶15. (C) That being said, the Prime Minister emphasized that the fight near Tripoli had been costly, in both men and equipment, and urgently asked the U.S. to continue its much-appreciated military assistance so that the fight against radical militancy could be expanded. He said he realized that as long as Syrian-directed Palestinian militants were free to operate in his country, Lebanon's democracy and stability could never be assured. This was the opportunity he needed to actually implement one of the four

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agreements reached in last summer's national dialogue -- the disarming of Palestinian militias -- and he did not intend to let it pass.

¶16. (C) The Ambassador urged the Prime Minister to take advantage of the USD 100 million that Saudi Arabia has donated for immediate military assistance, but it was also clear that Siniora would be looking for a sustained assistance program to strengthen the one institution that the entire people of Lebanon have now rallied around. In particular, Siniora asked for help to replenish his stocks of large caliber artillery ammunition, as well as other equipment that woould help his army fight confront and defeat a well-armed and geographically dispersed enemy. He assured the Ambassador that he would use his connections to also ask for the applicable assistance from his Arab allies, as well as Turkey and cooperative EU countries.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

¶17. (C) Siniora described a political situation that was close to the cliche of wheels turning within wheels. He was skeptical of the Cousseran-inspired French initiative, dismissive of the rapidly-melting Swiss initiative, but appreciative of Amr Moussa's attempt to draft an Arab League package deal that sought to balance the opposition's long-sought increased power in the cabinet with the pro-reform movement's non-negotiable requirement that the country's new president protect Lebanon's sovereignty at all costs.

¶18. (C) Despite the general haziness of the French proposal, Siniora still perceived value in the plan to call together the various political factions, even at the second-tier level, because it would "freeze" the threat of pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud to create political chaos by (illegally) appointing a new set of government ministers.

Siniora understands that Lahoud is trying to use political intimidation to soften the negotiating stance of March 14th and, consequently, will use every means available, including the French and the Swiss, to distract the opposition from implementing what could be a difficult and destabilizing situation.

¶9. (C) The second strategy Siniora said he was pursuing was a re-engagement with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun. His most trusted advisor, Mohamad Chatah, is currently involved in (reportedly) substantive discussions with Gibran Bassil, Aoun's closet advisor. Siniora said he is trying to determine if Aoun is amenable to a comprehensive solution; one that would include an expanded cabinet, an agreement on the president, and perhaps a new electoral law, which seems to be of critical importance to the former general. Chatah said he would be returning from next week's trip to Paris as soon as possible to continue these discussions.

¶10. (C) In essence, the Prime Minister is using the positive outcome of Nahr al-Barid and the resulting improved position of his government to hold off Lahoud's threatened "second" cabinet scenario by pursuing two paths at the same time: use the Arab League and French initiatives to tie up Lahoud and Berri, but at the same time attempt to reach an acceptable solution with Aoun, who appears to be finally beginning to consider reasonable proposals.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Late in the evening of June 21, Walid Jumblatt informed the Ambassador that Hassan Nasrallah has decided to strictly limit his discussions with PM Siniora and March 14th leadership to an expansion of the cabinet, i.e. Nasrallah will not entertain discussing a deal involving the presidency until he has his blocking minority in the cabinet. If accurate, this would, in effect, scuttle the Arab League initiative (and Siniora's negotiating strategy) which sought to reach a comprehensive solution to end the current crisis. It appears that Nasrallah may have received new marching orders from Damascus.

¶12. (C) But then early this morning (June 22), Walid Jumblatt informed us that Amr Moussa has apparently (and unexpectedly) won acceptance from all parties to re-engage in

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a national dialogue that will address both an expanded cabinet and the presidential election. Full details are not yet available. End comment.

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